

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

24 January 2017

Report of the Management Team

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet

1 CHRISTMAS LIGHTS AND HANGING BASKETS – RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY PANEL

To set out the conclusions and recommendations of the Panel and commend these to the Cabinet.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The purpose of this review was to assess the current level of support provided by the Borough Council for Christmas lighting displays in some of the parished areas of the Borough, and to review how Christmas lighting displays and High Street Flower displays are currently provided and funded in Tonbridge.

1.1.2 The Panel were advised of the recent 'Fairer Charging' consultation and the subsequent decision of the Cabinet to request the Overview and Scrutiny to reviews whether opportunities existed to secure alternative external funding including contributions from local traders in Tonbridge. The aim would be to meet the costs of both Tonbridge Christmas lighting and the provision of hanging baskets as an alternative to potentially including the full costs of these in the special expenses scheme in the future, chargeable directly to Tonbridge residents.

1.2 Recommendations of the Panel

1.2.1 The Review Panel met on 22nd November 2016 to explore these issues in more detail. A copy of the Panel report is attached as Annex 1. Howard Porter, representing the Tonbridge Town Team, also attended the meeting. The following conclusions were agreed.

(a) Christmas Lighting Displays in the Parished Areas

1.2.2 Details of the current level of support to 7 Parishes in the Borough were provided along with the results of a consultation with the local bodies which organise these schemes. Members noted that the budget for Christmas lighting grants is £16,000. Allocations of grant are made to each trading 'centre' based on the number of units. The Council reimburses 50% of total expenditure up to the maximum

allocation. A condition of the grant award is that match funding is provided by the parish councils and/or traders in those localities. All responses received indicated that the current arrangements were working well and no changes were needed. On that basis, the Panel recommended that the current scheme and levels of grant support for the parished area be retained but that a further review should be undertaken when this is considered necessary.

(b) Tonbridge Christmas Lighting and High Street Floral Displays

- 1.2.3 It was noted that in Tonbridge, the Council directly provides Christmas lighting and hanging baskets with the full cost being borne by on the Council. On average, the annual cost of both functions is £34,000.
- 1.2.4 The Panel considered a number of issues relating to the current funding arrangements for Tonbridge and whether these should be funded in the future via the special expenses scheme or whether contributions should be sought from local traders and income generated via sponsorship etc. Comments received from the public via the 'Fairer Charging' consultation were noted during the Panel's discussion. – i.e. that some members of the public considered that traders should be contributing towards these costs, and some surprise was expressed that they were not already doing so.
- 1.2.5 In summary, the Panel agreed that both hanging basket displays and Christmas lighting in Tonbridge should be retained given the benefits they bring to the overall health of the town centre. Following further discussion regarding future funding options, the Panel agreed that the option of seeking contributions from traders and income from sponsorship etc. should be explored for 2017/18. It was also agreed that any funding generated must be additional to existing sources of income already being achieved or being planned for. *(Officers' note: Members are asked to note that as the Tonbridge Castle Lawn, for example, is deemed to be a strategic site as far as the adopted Special Expenses Scheme is concerned, and the costs are therefore charged to all residents of the borough, it follows that any income generated by the Council from the use of strategic sites should be for the benefit of all residents of the borough).*
- 1.2.6 However, if such options proved to be insufficient, the Panel recommendation was that, as a last resort, Full Council should be asked to review the listed functions within the Council's adopted Special Expenses scheme with a view to including these functions within the scheme from 2018/19. *(Officers' note: if Christmas lighting is included as a function within the Council's Special Expenses Scheme, all payments regarding Christmas lighting would need to be included. Therefore grants awarded to the parished areas of the borough would also need to be charged as a special expense to those relevant areas in order to ensure equity.)*
- 1.2.7 It was suggested that a range of fund raising initiatives should be explored in addition to just seeking direct support from town centre traders. Suggestions included raising income from regular events located on Council-owned land

including various types of markets, food festivals and boot fairs and one-off seasonal events such as a Christmas market and fun fair. In addition, further funding could be sought via sponsorship, commercial advertising and additional street-trading concessions.

- 1.2.8 It was agreed that the target income figure for 2017/18 should be set at 50% of the annual costs of Tonbridge Christmas lights and hanging baskets. – 50% was chosen as it represented the proportion of match funding required in parished areas as set out in paragraph 1.2.2, and this translates into a target of £17,000. The Town Team offered further support to help deliver this income.

1.3 Legal Implications

- 1.3.1 Provisions relating to special expenses are contained in the Local Government Finance Act 1992 at sections 34 and 35. These sections allow different amounts of council tax to be calculated for different parts of the district, depending on what, if any, special items relate to those parts.

1.4 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.4.1 Financial information is set out in the report.
- 1.4.2 It should be noted that if, in due course, it is recommended that Christmas lighting is included as a function within the Council's Special Expenses Scheme, all payments regarding Christmas lighting would need to be included. Therefore grants awarded to the parished areas of the borough would also need to be charged as a special expense to those relevant areas in order to ensure equity.

1.5 Risk Assessment

- 1.5.1 There is presently a disparity between the parished areas and the town of Tonbridge with regard to the provision of certain local services. This has largely been addressed through the adoption of the Special Expenses Scheme from April 2017. The treatment of Christmas Lighting and High Street floral displays remain to be resolved. If an appropriate way forward is not found, a level of disparity between the parished areas and Tonbridge will remain and could well be challenged.

1.6 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.6.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

1.7 Recommendations

1.7.1 The Scrutiny Panel commends the following recommendations to the Cabinet :

- (a) No change is made to the current arrangements for Christmas lighting grant support in the parished areas but these should be reviewed again when necessary.
- (b) Alternative funding options for Tonbridge Christmas lights and hanging baskets should be explored for 2017/18. If these options are found not to be viable, as a last resort, then Full Council be recommended to review the listed functions within the Council's adopted Special Expenses Scheme with a view to including the functions within the scheme from 2018/19.
- (c) A range of potential funding options should be explored including seeking direct support from local traders and achieving additional income generation from new events, markets, advertising and street trading concessions. This funding should be additional to any existing income already being generated, or being planned for, in the town centre.
- (d) The target income figure for 2017/18 should be set at £17,000, 50% of the annual costs of both Christmas lights and hanging baskets.
- (e) A review of the progress being achieved with the above initiatives should be undertaken in the 3rd quarter of 2017/18.

Background papers:

contact: Mark Raymond

Nil

Julie Beilby
Chief Executive